

Growing Christians

In the name of him who taught his disciples the truths of God's Kingdom, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading contains two parables of Jesus both of which have to do with growing plants. And that's especially fitting for today because, as I've mentioned before, the overall objective of the entire Pentecost season, which we've just recently launched and which we'll be in from now until about the end of November, is growth: growth of the Christian Church as a whole, and the growth of the Christian faith in each one of us – faith which then bears fruit in our lives in the form of increasingly Christ-like thinking, Christ-like discourse, and Christ-like behavior. Today's two parables give us insights into *how* that growth takes place.

And I have to admit that I always feel a little awkward when preaching a sermon with an agricultural theme like this to this congregation. That's because many of you have farming in your blood. You've been doing it for generations; whereas with respect to modern approaches to agriculture, I'm a complete amateur. Sure, I fiddle around growing a few things in the garden; but some of you are experts in the field. Farming the soil and making stuff grow is your livelihood. And so for me to stand here and tell you how it all works is rather like one of you standing up to address a group of pastors on the finer points of the Greek grammar of the New Testament. If you were to attempt it, you'd be way out of your league. And that's how I feel when talking to you about farming.

But the thing to see is that there is an overlap. That's what these two parables show us. There is a sense in which church is like a farm – it can be compared to one, anyway. And just as many of you grow corn and soybeans and raise livestock for a living, it's my calling – indeed the calling of all pastors of the church – to grow Christians. A lot of the same principles apply.

And before diving into today's parables, it's helpful to know that they appear in Mark's Gospel immediately after the Parable of the Sower, which Jesus explains in detail and thereby provides us the key for understanding what follows. So it'll be helpful if we do a quick review of that parable. I'm sure you remember how it goes. A man goes out sowing seed in his field. Some falls upon the hard path and the birds eat them up. They have no chance to grow. Other seeds fall upon soil that's shallow and rocky. These seeds germinate and spring up swiftly; but they have no deep roots. So when it gets hot and dry, they shrivel up and die. Some seeds land where there are a lot of weeds and brambles. These grow; but they are overshadowed and choked out by the competition. They produce no fruit. And finally there is the seed that falls on good soil. These grow and bear fruit, yielding increases of 30, 60, or even 100 times what was sown.

That's the parable as Jesus teaches it to the crowd. Later, privately, his disciples ask him what it all means. Jesus explains that the seed is the Word of God. Jesus himself, and those who are sent to proclaim his teachings after him, are the sowers. The various soils are the listeners, those who hear the Word of God. Some are like the hard path. The Word does not penetrate them. They don't want to hear it. They reject it. And the devil snatches the Word away. Others are like the stony soil. They receive the Word with joy. They come to faith in Jesus; but it's a shallow faith. There are unseen sins and other obstacles underneath the surface of their lives that prevent the Word from really attaching itself. And so when trouble or hardship comes or there's persecution on account of the Word, these abandon their Christian faith. The seed that falls among the thorns stands for those who hear the Word and believe,

and yet are so wrapped up in the things of this world, so caught up in, well, you name it: fads, material wealth, business, entertainment, sports, the pursuit of temporal happiness – so caught up in all that which might distract them from what is truly important and brings eternal joys, that their faith produces no fruit. And then there is the seed that falls on the good soil, which represents those who believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ and who allow it bear fruit for the Lord in what they think, say, and do.

There are two things about this parable I want to highlight. First, that it forces you, the listener, to ask, “What kind of soil am I?” The answer, if you’re honest, is that you have aspects of all four types of soil. There are areas in your life in which you don’t want to hear what God has to say. You want to do your own thing, so you block out God’s Word. There are other areas in which you’re willing to let it sink in; but only so far. It’s the faith you have that’s only skin deep, a question of outward appearances rather than being rooted deep in the heart. Also, we all have the thorny entanglements of this world which compete with God’s Word for our time and attention and so make us unproductive for his purposes. And finally, hopefully at least, we all have some good patches in which the seed of God’s Word can grow to fruition. The parable implies that we ought to be working on soil conditioning and improvement: breaking up the hard soil, digging out those hidden stones, pulling up the weeds and brambles so there’s more good soil in which the Word of God can grow to fruitful abundance in our lives.

The second thing I want to highlight is that it’s the seed of God’s Word that makes the soil (that is, you and me) productive. By itself, the soil produces nothing good. It’s vital that we understand this. The Scripture says that apart from the Word of God working faith in us by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are dead in sin and trespasses. We can do nothing that pleases God. Everything that leads to faith, forgiveness, life, salvation, spiritual understanding, and the genuine life of love that God desires to bring forth in us, springs up from the seed. The seed of God’s Word and that alone is what gives us life in Christ and makes us productive.

That insight is the key to understanding today’s two parables. They are, first, what’s been called the Parable of the Growing Seed. It’s unique to the Gospel of Mark. And it’s pretty straight forward. A man plants seed in the soil and then goes about his normal routine of life. He goes to bed, he gets up, he takes care of other business day after day, and all by itself the seed does its work. Over time it sprouts, then it grows and forms grain heads, and eventually it ripens. Then when it’s fully mature, the man sends in the harvesters to bring the crop home. The point is that he doesn’t do anything to make the seed grow and ripen. He’s not even aware of how it happens; he only knows that it does. The seed by itself is sufficient. It does the work. It contains everything it needs to make the soil fruitful.

And so it is with the word of God. The preacher can only plant it. This he does in Baptism, in the Scripture readings, in the explanation of the Word he provides in the sermon he prepares, in the liturgy, psalms, and hymnody which the Church recites and sings, and also in the Lord’s Supper. The pastor puts the Word out there; but that’s all he can do. The Word itself does the work. It’s what springs to life in the hearts and minds of the hearers. And it can do that because the Word itself is alive and active. It’s alive with the Spirit of Christ who comes in and with the Word as it is proclaimed.

To be sure, in this congregation anyway, the process starts with me. I typically sit down on Sunday afternoon and choose the text from which I’ll be preaching the next week. And just as soon as I do, it starts doing its work on me. On Monday I’ll study the text in more detail. I’ll translate it from the original language to pick up any nuances that aren’t obvious in the English. I’ll do a few word studies and read some commentaries. Maybe I’ll read sermons others have

prepared on the same text. And all the while, the Spirit is working on me through the Word both to produce repentance and faith in me, and to produce the message that he wants you to hear. The truth is that when I begin this process, I never know where it's going to take me. My goal is to get out of the way and let the Word and Spirit do the work. And they do. Reliably. Without fail. And it's funny, sometimes what I think is going to really connect with people doesn't. And something else that I think is almost too obvious to say, maybe just a sentence or two, is what hits home with someone. Weeks, sometimes years later, a person will come up to me and say, "I remember you said this in a sermon once, and it really opened my eyes. It's made a big difference in my walk of faith." And that's part of it: I don't know what's going to make that difference. We're all at different levels of spiritual maturity, preparedness, openness and vulnerability to the Word. All I can do is try to be faithful to the text, to say what it means, to provide some illustration, and suggest how it might apply to you – and then get out of the way and let the Word do its work.

Of course the temptation I face is to want to do something more. How can I make this message more effective? What can I do to encourage you toward greater faithfulness and godly living? Or, in other words, how can I produce in you the fruit God desires? And hopefully you see the problem. I can't. I can't do that any more than a farmer can make seeds grow. But that doesn't mean people don't try. There are all kinds of folks out there who say that using modern insights from the fields of sociology, psychology, and marketing and advertisement it's possible to come up with a new formula, a new method, to make the Word more effective. Week after week, I get mailings, E-mails, and phone calls from self proclaimed church growth experts who tell me that by applying their secret techniques (which are rather expensive, I might add) they can guarantee this church will grow, the people will be more faithful, they'll give more, they'll volunteer more, and overall they'll be better and more productive Christians. It grieves me to report that many pastors, church boards, and district and national leaders in the church have succumbed to this sort of sales pitch. They swallow it hook, line and sinker. And they pay for it too; believe me they pay for it. And once in a while these techniques will actually seem to be working: they'll get more people in church, the members will seem to be more active for a while. But the truth is that because it's the schemes of men rather than the Word of God which are producing the results, it isn't real growth at all. It's growth that comes from the flesh rather than from the Spirit of God. And perhaps this is where the comparison in the parable breaks down a bit, because by using genetic science and engineering we really can produce better seeds these days. But back when Jesus taught this parable, it wasn't possible. There was only one kind of seed. What you had was what you planted. And so it is with the Church. All we have is God's Word, which never changes. That's what we need to plant in order to produce true fruit God desires.

And that means too that we need to exercise patience. No one who farms plants soybeans today and expects to harvest them next week. That would be absurd. And yet, for some strange reason, in the church we often fall into the trap of wanting see immediate results – and when we don't, we're likely to doubt the effectiveness of the Word and go looking for other kinds of solutions – like those I mentioned before. No, just as a farmer knows he has to wait for the soil to produce, so we need to understand that it takes time for the Word of God in us to grow and produce fruit: first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. It doesn't happen all at once. And sometimes it takes an entire lifetime for the Lord to produce in us what he desires. The point is that he's patient about it. And so we too need to be patient. We need to trust that the Word of the Lord will do its work even though we don't see the results.

Because his Word is powerful – amazingly so. It is capable of astonishing growth. That's what today's second parable about the mustard seed shows us. Looking at a tiny, almost

spherical mustard grain, it's hard to imagine how large a plant it might become. You'd guess it would have to be pretty small, like the seed itself. But its size is deceptive. It grows very rapidly into a fairly large shrub, big enough, Jesus says, for birds to nest in it. The thrust of this parable is that the Word of God doesn't look like much. At a casual glance it appears to be nothing more than a book full of old stories, ancient teachings, and out-dated information. How can this have any application to us? How can it make any difference in our lives? Indeed, how can something so insignificant change the world?

The answer is that it's not insignificant – it only looks that way. It's not insignificant because it's all about Jesus. In fact, the Word and Jesus are one and the same. And to get an idea of how much potential for growth the Word has, we have only to look at the body of Jesus Christ. Think about it. He was just one man. He had a relatively short life, a brief three year ministry, after which he was rejected by men, crucified in a shameful way, hastily embalmed, and stashed in a borrowed tomb. If you had seen it happen, you would have thought that was the end of it. So much for the man called Jesus Christ. His body is now food for the worms – or so it would have appeared.

But that's not what happened. His body, like a mustard seed in the soil, sprang to life. And now, through the proclamation of his death for sin and his resurrection to life, people are coming to faith in him and being incorporated into his body, which we call the Church. It consists of some 2.5 billion people today, not to mention all those who over the centuries lived and died in the faith and are now with him in glory *and* all those who are yet to come to faith in him in the future. That's phenomenal growth. And such is the amazing growth potential of the Word not only in the church as a whole in terms of the number of believers, but also in your life as an individual believer. As the Word grows in you, as you continue to hear it, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, it is changing you, transforming you from a barren field, a sinner dead in trespasses, to a well watered garden producing fruit for the Lord. It's causing you to be a growing Christian.

Let us therefore never despise or avoid the Word, but rather gladly hear and learn it, taking advantage of every opportunity, in order that we may be growing Christians: maturing in faith, hope, and trust, and producing by God's power the fruit of love he so earnestly desires. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!